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# The Roman Catholic Church in Latin America



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## The Roman Catholic Church in Latin America

Exploration or conquest of new lands has been the program of all great nations in history. Ending the Fifteenth Century, Portugal and Spain were the two leading nations in this respect. Being Roman Catholic nations, the propagation of the faith was proclaimed as one of the chief motives. It was in 1493 that Pope Alexander VI (Borgia), at the request of the Spanish, settled the question of their new rights for exploration and conquest after discovery in the New World. A series of three BULLS in this year finally set Spain's exclusive rights to all west of 100 leagues to the west of the Azores and Cape Verde Islands. Portugal was to stay out of this area. So it was natural that Spain explored in this hemisphere and brought the Roman Catholic Church with her.

As in Hispaniola, the occupants in what we now know as Latin America were Indians of some group or another. Under the conquest and the harsh treatment of the Spaniards, they died off by the hundreds of thousands. To meet the needs for labor in the fields or mines, Negro slaves were brought over from Africa. There were Negro slaves in Hispaniola as early as 1503.

As the years went on, the French, the Dutch and the English became the main competitors of Spain in this hemisphere, with no papal decrees binding upon them, of course. Along with their own nationals who took part in colonization, there were the native Indians (if not entirely wiped out . . . as was the case in Haiti), the Negro and, in some cases, East-Indian indentured slaves . . . all of whom have inter-mixed to some degree. National feelings gave rise to wars of independence and today, with the exception of a small portion, Latin America (including the West Indies) is made up of independent nations, twenty in all.

The story of conquest is well known. I just wish to recall to mind that after conquest the enslavement of the Indian was the natural consequence. Now the Roman Church was not indifferent to this, and the Indian's most celebrated leader and defender was

Bartolome de las Casas, a Dominican missionary, later Bishop of Chiapa and known as the "Apostle of the Indians." Through his constant and unceasing intercession Pope Paul III (Alexander Farnese) in 1538 issued a brief in which he declared in absolute manner the fitness of the Indians for receiving Christianity, considering them "as veritable men, not only capable of receiving the Christian Faith, but, as we have learned, most ready to embrace that faith." ("The Spanish Conquest," Vol. 3, p. 327). The Pope then pronounced a sentence of excommunication against all those who should reduce the Indians to slavery, or deprive them of their goods.

The same Las Casas, however, repented later that he had approved the enslavement of Negroes (1517) . . . but the damage had been done and it turned out to be such a profitable trade indeed that the stopping of that degrading traffic and condition took several centuries in doing. One is led to believe that the Negroes were not considered "veritable men" or "capable of receiving the Christian faith." Moreover, the practical side had to be faced: the Indians made poor slaves and died by the thousands; the Negro, on the other hand, flourished and multiplied.\*\*

It was the custom to have priests and chaplains accompany the invading armies and in Hispaniola there was established in this way the Dominican Order. After the conquest of Mexico, the Indian Council of Spain resolved to send both Dominicans and Franciscans to the new world, and in 1524 the first expedition of them was sent out. Other Orders sent missionaries in later years.

We must not forget that even in that day there was a great difference between enacting a law and its being enforced. Purposes, aims, and designs vary . . . and even equally good-intentioned people can disagree on how matters should be carried out. For some years, for instance, the Franciscans were the chief opposers to the freeing of the Indians, and they fought Las Casas at every turn even to sending emissaries to combat him at the court of Spain.

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\*\* The Negroes flourished in the new land. It was first thought that they were nearly immortal, as for some time no one had seen a Negro die, except by hanging; and it was noticed that Negroes and oranges seemed to have found their natural soil in the island of Hispaniola. (Helps, Vol. 3, p. 196)

The basis for evangelization was fairly simple. For instance, Alonso Ojeda proclaimed how God created man, and all men being of one race, but of their having been dispersed on account of their large increase, and having formed various provinces and nations. Then he declared how God gave charge of all nations to one man called St. Peter, that he should be the head of the human race, and have rule over them all, and fix his seat in Rome "as the fittest place for governing the world." The proclamation goes on to say how all men of St. Peter's time obeyed him and took him for lord, as likewise all men have obeyed his successors, and will continue to obey them to the end of time. Thus papal power was established. Then the proclamation states that the pope gave jurisdiction over these lands to Catholic sovereigns, etc. (Helps, Vol. 1, p. 235)

The methods employed or approved were not without great merit.

#### INSTRUCTIONS TO JESUIT MISSIONS IN S.A. (1612)

In the first place, the provincial commands his brethren to attend to their own salvation; "for the more care we give to our own perfection, the more apt instruments we shall become for the salvation of the Indians." On that account the brethren must be very observant of the rules of the Order, not omitting their religious exercises, and studying the lives of Ignatius Loyola and Francis Xavier.

Second: They must learn the Indian languages.

Third: They must not go about singly, for the brother who is at hand to assist a brother is as the strongest tower to him.

Fourth: They should not form a Reduction (Reducción . . . Indian settlement to teach Christianity and arts of life) with any settlement subordinate to it. It must consist of a single town. The object of this rule was to prevent the traveling about of the brethren, and to concentrate their attention upon one place.

Fifth: Their object was not to make many Reductions (settlements) but to give great labor to those of which they undertake the charge.

Additional instructions including the caution to take great prudence in well teaching adults before Baptism . . . and to remember our Lord's testimony to His Apostles, "This is my commandment, that ye love one another as I have loved you." (Instructions given by Provincial Diego de Torres) (Helps, Vol. 4, p. 378).

It is important to note that in the colonization we find the two distinct streams which have colored the history of Latin America down to today. Both the Church and the State were creating for themselves representatives in Spanish America. This representation was, for the most part, exact and faithful. Corregidores, regidores, alcaldes, alguaziles, procuradores, veedores, contadores, jueces de residencia, and all the officers usually to be met in Spain were transplanted to the Indies, and flourished there. The Church was fully represented in the New World by bishops, deans, priests, clerigos, and monks of every denomination. First came the Franciscans and the Dominicans; then the Fathers of Mercy and the Augustinians. Lastly, came the Jesuits, who, where they settled, maintained a hold upon the country greater than that of the other monastic orders.

During the Sixteenth Century most of Latin America had come under the domination of Spain and, as a consequence, under the Roman Church. The two went together. For nearly two centuries nothing greatly changed. This is important to remember, for the pattern was set . . . particularly in the realm of religion where people tend to be the most conservative.

In passing, as we consider the historical development of the colonization . . . it is well to remind ourselves that in the Seventeenth Century, particularly, there were French Huguenots, Dutch and English Calvinists as well as representatives of the British Crown looking for plunder or to colonize in the name of their respective countries in the new world. The famous island of La Tortuga (off the northwest coast of Haiti) was taken by the British from the Spanish, then by the French (in 1640 the French Huguenots were in complete control) and here we have the main center for the buccaneers or "flibustiers" (boucaniers of the forest and flibustiers of the sea). It is during this period that Jamaica and the other Caribbean Islands came under the control of the British; Martinique, Guadeloupe, Haiti under the French; Curacao under the Dutch . . . etc. The British pirates on Providence Island (Santa Catalina) with a few thousand heretics (Newton's "The European Nations in the West Indies") had established a well-armed fortress in the heart of the Indies, and there they flaunted their hatred of everything Roman Catholic with impudent effrontery. We must also remind ourselves that both France and England used the buccaneers as an instrument for the furtherance of their Caribbean policies.

The Nineteenth Century saw the big movement towards independence. This was encouraged by what had happened when these British colonies became the United States. Haiti (western part of Hispaniola) was next, declaring her independence in 1804. Simon Bolivar and other patriots carried the torch of freedom, and aided and abetted by other independent countries, the Spanish empire fell apart. However, Independence did not mean the destruction of the Roman Church. It had trained and nurtured and educated those that were its people and if they had a Christian home, this was it. Moreover it was well established and international . . . not sectarian in its aspect . . . and it was a political international entity with political power. To a new and struggling nation, this international support and aid proved to be of vital importance and gave a sense of security. It was only natural then that the Roman Church should remain as the religious force of the new State and of its people. Wherever possible, a concordat was entered into between the Vatican and the new Republic. In this way the Church was guaranteed privileges and rights, financial support and not least, usually the control of public education. Here was a State Church with Power.

Though I have spent nineteen years in Latin America, my ministry and visits have been confined to the Caribbean and to Central America. But as I read about South American countries, the picture I shall try to draw might well represent them too . . . pretty much, at any rate. In some countries there is a concordat with the Vatican (hence her position and power are established by law); in others there is no concordat but the Roman Church functions as the State Church due to her long history, her long establishment, her important buildings and schools and the fact that the leaders have been so-called "faithful". These countries are in the main Roman Catholic countries and that Church is the State Church for all practical purposes.

In Haiti, for instance, there is a concordat (signed in 1860 and expiring in 1960) whereas in the Dominican Republic there was no concordat until Mr. Trujillo, the Benefactor, signed one with the Vatican recently. But to all intents and purposes it was a State Church in both countries.

Though a Bull or papal decree may always be found to support worthy social enterprises and conduct, it is safe to say that, usually in Latin America they have not been carried out too assiduously.

Education, power (in all forms) are for the few duly qualified to rule. Where the masses have been helped it has been a kind of patronage or condescending charity . . . not as a right. This is true in the field of education, health and economy. However the important thing for them was to make sure that each child was baptised and thus assured of salvation.

As the Roman Church regards herself as the only Church, the True Church, it is only natural that she should regard herself as the only medium for salvation through Jesus Christ our Lord. This alone is a great source of power and force. There is no division. There is only ONE and she is IT. That makes teaching easy and, of course, even here in America we have a penchant for security . . . in one way or another. Is it any wonder that millions accepted baptism? So the Kingdom of God, . . . an earthly Kingdom in competition with (if it could not engulf) the kingdoms of this world, . . . grew by the thousands.

The uniqueness of her message is that the Church  
is one; is visible; is Roman.

That her teaching is one; is Catholic

That she alone brings redemption – salvation . . . outside the Roman Church there is no salvation. (Exclusive-Inclusive.)

And she brings the evidence of all this to bear in her great numbers of missionaries, usually well trained, her fine churches and schools and monasteries, and the fact that her church dignitaries are either dignitaries of the State or are in the counsels of the State

Much more than this can and perhaps should be said . . . but this much is abundantly true, and, to me, of the most significance. However, her strength is in some very particular cases precisely the cause of her weakness.

At this point I might well speak of the reasons for the difference between the Roman Catholic Church in the United States and in Latin America. First, the Roman Church did not come into what is now the U.S. with the colonizers and did not set up the State-Church organization. She came in later (except in Louisiana, Maryland, and the Southwest) in competition with non-Roman, Protestant Churches. The Visibility of the Church-State was not apparent . . . HENCE she has had to win her converts and maintain her position

on the basis of teaching and ministering. Where in Latin America the Church-State was established, her position was guaranteed and secured whether she taught and ministered to each and all or not. The job with so many "converts" was a stupendous and almost impossible one. They never had enough missionaries to teach and to minister and they don't have today. As a result, the tendency has been to rely on the evidence of position and power and hope for the best. Also, since there has been little competition there was no challenge and as the centuries rolled on that situation became increasingly worse.

It became easier as a matter of course to operate in the councils of the State and to have one's position guaranteed by law . . . rather than to teach the masses, to minister to them, to win and to have them as genuine supporters and faithful. For a long time it seemed to work. The failure has been:

1. People have been baptised by the thousands and it has reduced the Sacrament of Baptism almost to magic. These people may be listed as Roman Catholics but certainly take no active part in the church's life and work.
2. The masses have not been educated. If divide and rule was the policy of the Roman Empire, it has been the policy of the Roman Church (as it has of any totalitarian power). The small percentage of educated elite who control commerce and government are not eager for the competition of the masses, and they are glad to play the game with keeping the power where it belongs . . . State-Church. I have put State first because in a choice of loyalties many will abandon the Church if it cannot be counted on to keep them in power . . . which is what has happened in many instances.
3. There is always a rising from the masses (they cannot be kept down permanently) and there are always a few "elite" of Christian conscience. These are the ones who finally rise and challenge the Church and her privileges and power.
4. As in Haiti, the people begin to ask questions about what they see and experience. The Church is supported by the State; the Church controls most of the public schools (power broken in 1946); the State maintains the Church seminaries (even one in France); the Church runs the charitable institutions (hospitals, reformatories) . . . and what do they find?

People, the poorest in the Caribbean, yet having to pay for the Sacraments.

The highest illiteracy rate in the Caribbean, viz., 90.4%

No doctors or nurses or dispensaries in most of the mountain and country districts and the town hospitals in deplorable condition and giving, in the main, dreadful care.

Haiti and her culture ridiculed. If it isn't French, Italian or Spanish it is bad and spurious.

Let us not forget, however, that Rome can change her policies and does. That is why I say that it is the competition of the other churches in the United States that makes Roman Catholicism here different from what we find in Latin America. The atmosphere is entirely different due to an entirely different historic background. But what Rome is doing in the United States she can and may do in Latin America, which she seems to be doing slowly and under protest.

That is why Rome is closely examining herself . . . taking stock and planning for the future. There are many Orders at work in Latin America from Europe, Canada and the United States. The Maryknoll Brothers have many missionaries and their Lima Report is a serious stock-taking. They themselves see, as I quote from an article in the National Catholic Monthly for September, 1956, entitled, "How Catholic is Latin America" by Albert J. Nevins, Associate Editor of "Maryknoll Magazine:"

"Out of a total population of over 157 million, more than 136 million people of Latin America claim to be Catholics, but even by the most generous estimates only about 10 per cent can be called practicing Catholics. The sad fact is that Catholicism in Latin America is nothing more than a tradition for the vast majority of people."

"A Chilean priest, Father Albert Hurtado, made a survey in his own country several years ago. He discovered that three and a half per cent of the men and nine and a half per cent of the women attended Sunday Mass. Only a little more than ten per cent made their Easter duty."

This same article states that in the United States there is one priest for every 694 Catholics. The Dominican Republic has one priest for every 13,000 Catholics, Honduras one for every 9,537, Guatemala one for every 16,000. And since many priests are engaged in educational and administrative work, this picture is even worse than that revealed by statistics. It reveals that parish organizations

are few and usually ineffective; that lay leadership is almost nil; that the majority are conservative and label attempts to aid the masses as communistic and states that the areas where the Church is dying are: Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil, Panama, Dominican Republic, Honduras, Haiti.

The article ends on this note: "Latin America is really a mission continent . . . But it is the best mission continent in the world. Because of its catholic traditions we have more here to work on than anywhere else. The entire continent can be made catholic once a sufficient number of priests are available for giving instructions."

This brings me to some observations in conclusion that are of importance to me in considering this entire question:

The totalitarian state seems to be so congenial to the Roman Catholic mind because of its own church organization. Moreover, the laity are trained in this tradition and it largely accepted as a matter of course. Inasmuch as everything is decided and controlled by a hierarchical system it is no small wonder that the people take little interest in its affairs because they have been trained to obey and follow. This temper pervades the entire social and political life in Roman Catholic countries as the normal reflection of the earthly Kingdom of God as they interpret it. The President is easily identified as the "Papa" or "Pere" or political Pope. Everything depends on him and his government. It is his job to run the country and to dispense the favors. The average citizen's job (the small percentage which help him run the country excepted) is to do as little as possible, let the rulers rule, take no responsibility not be blamed for anything and seek and receive as many favors as possible . . . usually through flattery, shake-down or black-mail. This method to social life did not come into the world with Communism. I am often amused (annoyed too) by the naivete of otherwise intelligent people (North Americans, usually) who ask me if the local authorities and the people are not being influenced by Communists because of their tactics. These tactics are age-old.

This totalitarianism does bring uniformity and a definite order, efficiency, and a unity of witness. Sometimes I wish we in our Church had more of it! However, only an Omnipotent God of Love could grant to his children free will. THAT GOD is not busy declaring His infallibility . . . He doesn't have to. Infallibility and regimentation have their fruits . . . among them some specimens that are a

little sad-looking and damaged by their fall. There is a tendency to make Christians which looks near to magic to many people. As a result thousands are baptised who know but little about the Christian religion or who are little affected by it. Their names appear on the lists. Of course, we all have too many of them too. However, I think of a visit I made to a Roman priest (at his request) in the Dominican Republic. I asked him the number of people in his parish to which he replied, "About 50,000, but not more than 12 know what the Christian religion is." I have never forgotten his following words, viz., "The Roman Church has been baptising animals for the last 400 years." I could go on about this matter, but one should note seriously that a goodly percentage of the members of the Roman Church have not been instructed and do not really share the Christian faith in any vital way. Membership in the Roman churches is convenient; it is socially correct; it offers many advantages like finding and keeping jobs; it helps politically; it means the children will be able to go to school unmolested . . . but for them, it is not "*the way*."

We can learn something from all of this, if we will. Let us:

1. Teach and practice the Christian Faith. We must teach in season and out. There is no short-cut. This faith must be lived and be vital. Remember also that the Christian religion isn't easy. In our missionary endeavors we sometimes tend to be sentimental rather than theological!
2. Not be blinded by apparent numerical success. Remember "Rice Christians" are the result . . . and we all have them too. Were we to cease the subsidies (a nasty word) of clothing, medicine, medical care, food, education, many of our "members" would seek the paternal care of some other sentimental Christian body.
3. Send only our best overseas. Let's keep our problem-children home where the environment won't destroy them, and, incidentally, harm the Church's witness. Too many free-loaders and personally ambitious people also get overseas as missionaries.
4. Send properly trained and disciplined missionaries.
5. Prepare the best possible natives or nationals.
6. Be better or stay out. Remember that we too come as "one that serveth" "A new commandment give I unto you that ye love one another as I have loved you."